

## The Joy of Weeds

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### Florida's Wildflowers

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# WILD POINSETTIA

by David W. Hall

Wild Poinsettia is a common name that is applied to two separate species of the genus *Euphorbia*. Both species occur commonly throughout Florida. This genus is in the Spurge Family (Euphorbiaceae). The two species, *Euphorbia heterophylla* L. and *Euphorbia cyathophora* Murr., are virtually identical. The only easily recognizable difference in the two species is a distinction in the shape of a gland which is located on the structure bearing the flowers.

Both species are herbaceous annuals, but *E. cyathophora* can be a short-lived perennial. Both species can reach about four feet in height, but are often no more than one or two feet tall. The stems are usually lacking hairs and have many branches near the top. The leaves, which can be up to 15 cm long and are with or without hairs, are usually opposite but often alternate leaves occur on the same plant. The leaves are quite variable, being without petioles (sessile) or having a petiole as long as 4 cm. The shape varies, even on the same plant, from linear, to elliptic, to ovate, to fiddle-shaped. The leaf margins are entire, toothed or lobed, again, even on the same plant. The upper leaves of *E. cyathophora* are often red near the base while the upper leaves of *E. heterophylla* have purple or whitish blotches, but are never red at the base. The flowers are inconspicuous and highly modified. They are separated into male and female



flowers. Several flowers of each sex occur in each inflorescence or cluster. Each flower is contained in a small cup. The margin of each cup has a prominent gland. The gland of *E. heterophylla* has a round mouth and the gland of *E. cyathophora* has a closed (compressed) mouth (see illustration). The fruit of both species is a three-sided capsule 3-4 mm long. The seeds are approximately 3 mm long and have a rough surface covered with small bumps.

The genus, *Euphorbia*, was named for Euphorbus, a physician to King Juba of Numidia. Numidia is now northeastern Algeria. The species name *heterophylla* refers to the variable shape of the leaves. The species name *cyathophora* means cuplike and refers to the cup bearing the flowers. *E. heterophylla* occurs naturally from Arizona, southern Texas, and Florida southwards throughout the American tropics and has become naturalized in Louisiana and coastal Texas. *E. cyathophora* is

distributed widely throughout the temperate United States east of the Rocky Mountains and southwards through the West Indies, Mexico, and Central America to South America.

If you do not have these colorful plants in your yard now they can easily be started from seeds. They normally inhabit borders and disturbed soils. A few seeds scattered by hand in these areas will get a population started. The numbers of plants within the population, once started, will tend to vary from dense to very scattered depending on the conditions from year to year. Mature plants can eject seeds up to three feet from the parent by a mechanism triggered by drying of the capsule. After falling, the seed is dormant. Dormancy can be broken by temperatures alternating between 75° and 95° F. Other alternating temperatures are not as successful. Seeds continue to germinate throughout the summer, thus providing a colorful display through the warm months.

Around homes these plants tend to stay within the borders where they are put. They do not spread rapidly. The sticky, white sap (latex) of the Wild Poinsettia can be an irritant to some people. *E. cyathophora*, sometimes called Painted Poinsettia or Painted Leaf, perhaps has the showiest display of color, but *E. heterophylla*, Wild Poinsettia, is also quite attractive. Whichever you choose, these relatives of the cultivated poinsettia will enhance your landscape.

#### Glossary:

*petiole* — the stem-like part of a leaf.

*sessile* — without petioles, or leaf-stems.